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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION IN SLOVAKIA ON
PRESIDENT'S TRIP

1. Summary: The President's visit to Slovakia was generally perceived by media analysts and public commentary as an expression of positive U.S.- Slovak relations and of appreciation for Slovakia's support of the U.S. in the war against terrorism, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan. The meeting with the "Champions of Freedom" and the public speech played well in Slovakia, especially in contrast to Russian President Putin's more traditional and formal program the following day. As expected, visa policy received much attention, and the crowd applauded when the President mentioned it in his speech. Slovak commentators also noted that the visit drew positive attention to Slovakia's quick and successful progress towards democracy. Negative aspects were some unseemly bickering among Slovak leaders about the schedule and post-speech criticism about the prohibition against bringing signs and banners to the square. End summary.

2. Slovak media and think tanks extensively commented on the President's visit to Europe, with the primary focus understandably on his visit to Bratislava. The February visit of President Bush was the first-ever Presidential visit to Slovakia, so the bilateral meetings with Slovak leaders attracted much local media interest. However, the public speech remained the center of attention for opinion leaders and the general public, followed by the Bush-Putin meeting and joint press conference.

3. Besides detailed and regular reporting on the program of the President's visit, Slovak media published a significant number of commentaries, written not only by professional journalists, but also by analysts from think tanks, as well as extensive reader reaction.

4. The President's visit to Slovakia was seen as an expression of positive U.S.- Slovak relations and as a reward for Slovakia's support for the U.S. in its war against terrorism, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Slovaks clearly got the President's message that his visit was meant to highlight Slovakia's democratic transformation.

5. According to Slovak media, opinion leaders, and the general public, the highlight of Bush's trip to Europe was his address to Slovak citizens in the historical center of Bratislava. This was clearly reflected in the headlines of Slovak newspapers: "Bush: Slovakia an example of the expansion of freedom" (Hospodarske Noviny); "Bush: Your example is an inspiration for others" (SME); "U.S. President surprises people with his straightforwardness" and "Public on the speech: It was propaganda, but it was nice" (Narodna Obroda).

6. All media, both print and broadcast, noted that despite the cold weather, thousands of Slovak citizens came to listen to President Bush's remarks. When reporting on the content of the speech, several commentators expressed great appreciation for the fact that the President mentioned examples from Slovak history connected with its fight for freedom and democracy and presented Slovakia as a model of a country that was able to change its story to one of freedom. According to SME: "Bush sent the message to the whole world that his America is ready to help any country that shows an interest in freedom". SME in its commentary presented his words that Slovakia is one chapter of the same story of freedom and democracy, followed by Georgia, Ukraine and in the near future also possibly by Moldova and Belarus. However, there was some resistance to the idea that the situation in Iraq is comparable. As SME reported, "Bush tried to persuade listeners that Iraq, too, is one of the chapters of this story. He compared the free Iraqi elections to the Velvet Revolution in the former Czechoslovakia. Public reaction to this part of the speech was rather reserved. The opinion that Iraq is not another chapter of the same story, but a different one, is quite widespread in Slovakia."

17. Media also frequently quoted the part of the speech where President expressed great appreciation for the participation of Slovak soldiers in Afghanistan, Iraq and Kosovo.

18. The President received the most applause when he mentioned that he understands that the visa issue is an important factor in bilateral relations. SME

highlighted an excerpt from Bush's remarks to Slovak citizens: "Hundreds of thousands of our citizens can trace their roots back to this country. Slovak Immigrants helped to build America and shape its character."

19. Even before the visit, Slovak media - reflecting public interest - devoted a lot of attention to the possibility of granting the visa waiver to Slovakia. Raising the issue at the Presidential level was seen as a positive sign. As the daily Hospodarske Noviny said in its commentary: "Never before has the U.S. President spoken so openly on the visa issue. It seems that Americans have started to understand that the visa requirement make us second-class Europeans." Daily Narodna Obroda also quoted Prime Minister Dzurinda saying after his bilateral meeting with the President that Bush himself opened this issue. The same article presents President Gasparovic's comments that at their meeting Bush mentioned that the U.S. has prepared a so-called road map for visa regime liberalization. On the same issue, daily SME quotes PM Dzurinda's remark to President Bush: "When we speak about freedom, without freedom of movement, it is only a partial freedom."

10. Overall, Slovak political analysts labeled the speech as highly balanced, positive and professionally well-prepared, according to the daily Hospodarske Noviny. They also said it was an indication that the main focus of President Bush's second term is the expansion of freedom.

11. There were also some negative aspects of the visit noted in analyses and in public comments. The prohibition against bringing signs and banners to the speech was criticized as an infringement on free expression. There was considerable grumbling about the tight security net that was thrown over a large part of the city. Slovak media also reported the fact that President Bush didn't visit the Slovak Parliament or have a separate meeting with the speaker of Parliament and some politicians' view that this represented a politically motivated failure of the Slovak foreign ministry.

12. Comment: The Slovak people went into the Presidential visit with optimistic expectations. More than two-thirds believed that it would enhance Slovakia's international reputation, and more than half thought it would help the Slovak economy. Slovaks are generally gratified at the recognition they received in the President's speech and by the fact that they were chosen to host the Bush-Putin meeting. It was a rare opportunity for them to be at the center of the world stage.

THAYER

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